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**Parent's conception and experience of calling in child rearing: A qualitative analysis**

Justin C. Coulson  
*University of Wollongong*, [jcoulson@uow.edu.au](mailto:jcoulson@uow.edu.au)

Lindsay G. Oades  
*University of Wollongong*, [loades@uow.edu.au](mailto:loades@uow.edu.au)

Gerard J. Stoyles  
*University of Wollongong*, [stoyles@uow.edu.au](mailto:stoyles@uow.edu.au)

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### Keywords

conception, experience, parent, qualitative, calling, analysis, child, rearing

### Disciplines

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# Parent's Conception and Experience of Calling in Child Rearing: A Qualitative Analysis

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Justin Coulson<sup>1</sup>, Lindsay Oades<sup>1</sup>,  
and Gerard Stoyles<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The concept of “calling” has evolved from a religiously oriented description of occupation to an integrated, broad, and multidimensional construct that is associated with optimal vocational outcomes, personal fulfillment and meaning, and contribution to the “greater good.” This article investigates the relevance of calling in the parental domain and explores the experience of calling in child rearing. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, 11 qualitative, semistructured interviews were conducted with mothers and fathers. Different parents were interviewed at three distinct developmental time points in their child(ren)’s lives: while their child was an infant (<2 years), while their children were of primary school age (aged 4–12), and when their children were in their late teens or early 20s and were more or less independent (>17 years). Parents of both genders and across the range of ages showed strong similarity in their definitions and experiences of calling-oriented child rearing. Parents’ definitions and experiences were also consistent with the conception and experience of calling in previous research. Cultural concerns related to free will and religion are discussed. This research demonstrates

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<sup>1</sup>University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

## Corresponding Author:

Justin Coulson, University of Wollongong, Northfields Ave, Wollongong, Australia, 2522  
Email: [jcoulson@uow.edu.au](mailto:jcoulson@uow.edu.au)

that the concept of calling is relevant in child rearing and that the sense of calling may also be associated with optimal outcomes in this domain. Recommendations for future research include the need to develop a measure of calling in child rearing and the usefulness of targeted interventions aimed at enhancing the sense of calling in parents.

### **Keywords**

calling, child rearing, parent, orientation, parenting, qualitative

Calling is a subjective phenomenon often described by the phrase “doing what I was born to do.” Although historically calling was best exemplified in a religious context (Dreher & Plante, 2007), the modern term *calling* retains only minimal connotations of piety and is routinely examined in a career and vocational context (Dik, Sargent, & Steger, 2008; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Markow & Klenke, 2005; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski, Rozin, & Bennett, 2003). Research into life meanings, often a pursuit of humanistic psychology (Frankl, 2006; Shaffer, 1978; Tagesson, 1982), was heavily influential in modern theoretical conceptualizations of the construct of calling (Baumeister, 1991; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985) and subsequent empirical investigation (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Ensuing research has led to a more clearly defined, deeper, and richer perspective on calling as it applies in vocational contexts (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dobrow, 2006). This article will investigate the relevance of calling in the parental domain and explore the experience of calling in child rearing through the identification of key themes encompassed by the term *calling*.

### **Calling**

Calling is a description of active engagement in a noble pursuit, typically one’s chosen vocation (Baumeister, 1991; Bellah et al., 1985; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Seligman, 2002). It connotes a “positive framing of fulfilling work” (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003, p. 186). Seligman (2002) claimed that those who feel called are more likely to experience optimal outcomes such as gratification, flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), and a sense that their work is satisfying. These favorable outcomes have been demonstrated in research where participants who sense a calling in their vocation were compared with participants who did not have that same sense (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). But what is “calling”?

Previous researchers (Baumeister, 1991; Bellah et al., 1985; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) have predominantly relied on enunciating constructs that comprise calling in the vocational context as part of a theoretical explication. Other researchers have used similar processes, tending to describe and extrapolate on calling rather than refining and redefining the concept. Concepts argued to be necessary parts of calling include the use of character strengths and talents (Dreher & Plante, 2007; Oates, Hall, & Anderson, 2005; Seligman, 2002). Deity is also regularly invoked in defining calling, suggesting the awareness and acceptance of an external call as a necessary dimension to having a calling (Davidson & Caddell, 1994; Markow & Klenke, 2005; Oates et al., 2005; Sellers, Thomas, Batts, & Ostman, 2005). Although the term is typically reserved for vocational pursuits, Seligman (2002) and Baumeister (1991) argue that calling can be relevant in any work one participates in.

Dik and Duffy (2009) argued for a three-dimensional definition of calling. First, an individual must perceive the calling as a response to an external source, be it God, the community, family, or fate. Second, the calling must provide purpose and meaningfulness to the individual who feels called. Third, the calling must be perceived as directly or indirectly making a contribution to society, the community, or the “common good.” Specifically, they state that a calling is

a transcendent summons, originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness, and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary motivation. (p. 427)

Dik and Duffy’s (2009) definition of calling concisely integrated historical, theoretical, and empirical research. This was an important advance on previous authors’ discussions. These authors also noted the importance of an ongoing connection between the calling and the individual, suggesting that the call is not a “one-off” experience but a long-term need. However, the idea of longevity of a calling was not incorporated into their explicit definition. Moreover, in defining calling Dik and Duffy did not make reference to an important contribution to calling research made by Dobrow (2006).

### *Dobrow’s Integrated View of Calling*

Dobrow’s (2006) view of calling is arguably the richest and deepest evidence-based definition of calling in current research (see Table 1), in spite of the use of a university sample of musicians. Although remaining relatively true to the historical and theoretical aspects of feeling called (excluding the role of deity

**Table 1.** Comparison of Constructs Used to Describe or Define Calling

	Bellah et al. (1985) <sup>a</sup>	Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) <sup>a</sup>	Dik and Duffy (2009)	Dobrow (2006)
External call	✓		✓	
Meaning/purpose	✓	✓	✓	✓
Contribution (to self, other, or society)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Passion	✓	✓		✓
Identity	✓	✓		✓
Urgency	✓			✓
Longevity			✓ <sup>b</sup>	✓
Engulfs the consciousness		✓		✓
Domain-specific self- esteem		✓		✓

<sup>a</sup>Calling not concisely defined but elaborated on by these authors.

<sup>b</sup>Latent theme, not explicitly stated in the definition of calling.

in calling), Dobrow qualitatively identified seven dimensions of calling. Each is measurable on a continuum from *low* (1) to *high* (7), with the overall outcome indicative of the extent to which a person may or may not feel called. Those with lower scores on Dobrow's continuum were considered not to have a sense of calling, and as the scores increased, so too did the sense of calling.

The first of the elements in Dobrow's (2006) model of calling is *passion*. Passion reflects an individual's enjoyment of, and absorption in, a specific task or role. *Identity* is the second element of Dobrow's calling model and indicates that the role to which people feel called to has become a central part of how individuals define themselves. Third, *urgency* explains the sense of having a work that *must* be done. However Dobrow (2006) argues that it is not a requirement that the sense of having a work to do be externally imposed, as suggested by Dik and Duffy (2009). Rather, urgency is derived through following one's "*daimon*," or using specific and unique strengths and talents as the basis for the sense of destiny that accompanies calling. This allows for external or internal calls to be regarded as equivalent in leading a person along a given life path (Baumeister, 1991). *Longevity* is the fourth element and suggests that a calling is a "life path." Those who feel called to do something do not lose the passion, urgency, or identity associated with that call shortly after feeling it. Rather than being a fleeting idea, the calling extends itself through a significant portion of the individual's life. The calling *engulfs*



*the consciousness*, pervading the thoughts, hopes, dreams, actions, and conversation of the individual, whether actively engaged in the task or not. The calling provides a *sense of meaning*, although Dobrow emphasizes that meaning is manifest through contribution, thus combining two elements of Dik and Duffy's (2009) model—meaning and contribution. Sense of meaning, from Dobrow's (2006) perspective, is a subjective belief that the role one is called to fulfill is meaningful and contributes to the common good. Last, Dobrow (2006) found that calling requires *domain-specific self-esteem*. This suggests that participation in one's calling enhances positive feelings about the self. Table 1 compares previous researchers' discussions and definitions of calling.

Several of the elements of Dobrow's (2006) definition of calling are arguably implied but not explicit in Dik and Duffy's (2009) definition. Contribution, passion, identity, and longevity are each potentially concealed within the two dimensions of meaning/purpose and contribution/service. However, Dobrow (2006) not only provides a richer view of calling, but does so by offering an empirically derived conceptualization of the construct that extends previous research. Likewise, both Baumeister (1991) and Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) spend considerable time describing calling with constructs consistent with Dobrow's (2006) definition, but they never concisely define the term or offer empirical support for their definition.

A possible limitation of Dobrow's (2006) definition is that his view of calling does not require an external source for the call (see Davidson & Caddell, 1994; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dreher & Plante, 2007; Oates et al., 2005; Seligman, 2002; Sellers et al., 2005) and is therefore not consistent with the historical origins of the concept. Dobrow (2006) argues that this lack of an external agent allows the construct to be culturally broad. Furthermore, according to Dobrow, the locus of the call is less important than the associated dimensions of calling. Such a suggestion implies that the name of the construct (calling) is less important than its components. Many people may feel uncomfortable claiming that their work is a "calling" yet still score highly on measures of passion, identity, meaningfulness, and so forth. If a strong score on each component is what leads to optimal outcomes, the title of "calling" may be less important than possession of high levels of its constituent elements. Thus, this allowance arguably makes the concept of calling more generalizable and therefore more applicable to various domains. It further expands the concept of calling beyond a Christian, religiously oriented population and may increase its applicability cross-culturally.

Humanistic psychologists have devoted great volumes of work to many of the themes that theoretically comprise calling. Yet the construct has not been

described in detail by any humanistic authors. In spite of this, the calling framework is consistent with humanistic psychology in two important ways. First, it presents an optimized model of how one might approach an important life role. Calling's association with flow and well-being is consistent with, though not the same as, the Maslowian ideal of actualization and peak experiences (Maslow, 1968). The notion of calling may, in some way, describe the actualizing tendency (Tageson, 1982). Although it is an empirical question, the presence of a calling in one's life and the associated satisfaction, engagement, and meaning it provides potentially facilitate the opportunity for actualization and peak experience (Maslow, 1968). Second, calling is an undeniably subjective experience (Dobrow, 2006). Calling is ultimately directed to the humanistic purpose of facilitating healthier, growth-oriented relationships in families (Tageson, 1982). It points to a process of development and personal and interpersonal evolution based on contribution, purpose, meaning, and growth.

### *Calling in Child Rearing*

The role of a parent requires something of parents that traditional work and career roles do not. Rossi (1968) made several important points regarding the uniqueness of child rearing. (a) There exists considerable social pressure on a person to assume the role of a parent. Cultural and societal expectations are such that on inception of the parent role, this title and role remain a part of one's identity throughout life. (b) A recreative (rather than a procreative) act may have led to the inception of the child-rearing role; therefore, not all parties are guaranteed to be willing participants in the child-rearing role. (c) The role of a parent is irrevocable in that once commenced, there are few, if any, socially sanctioned ways of relinquishing the role. (d) There is little preparation available for those preparing to embark on the child-rearing journey. Conversely, a traditional work role is something that not everyone is expected to participate in, especially for the term of their natural life. Those who participate in employment generally do so by making a conscious decision to be involved. Retirement is both socially acceptable and expected. It is also socially acceptable to leave employment if a more promising alternative appears or if the work becomes dissatisfying. There is also training for almost every job, with many careers requiring many years of training before a person is considered sufficiently competent to participate in that profession.

### *The Present Study*

It is important to be clear that extending a construct into the role of child rearing that is generally associated most intuitively with work is not to suggest

that child rearing and work are the same. Yet our language and social interactions suggest that the “work” of rearing children may be viewed as a calling (Seligman, 2002; Super, 1980) and indeed that the term *calling* may apply to any life role. Baumeister (1991) specifically stated that a very clear example of a calling outside vocational pursuits is that of “housewife and mother” (p. 126). Other researchers have also suggested similar possibilities for calling and child rearing (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dobrow, 2006).

Child rearing, like vocational pursuit, incorporates critical elements of humanistic psychology: values, goals, and meaning (Bühler & Allen, 1972). Rogers (1977) described child rearing as the “process of relating” (p. 31). He argued that an emphasis on relationships is the healthiest, most optimal focus in family life for the growth and optimization of the individual. As Rogers detailed this relating process, the constructs comprising calling were clearly discernible, though not always in the language used in modern theoretical and empirical work. Similarly, Moustakas (1971) describes authentic adults who allow children to be authentic through the development of autonomy, responsibility, talents, and learning. Although not speaking specifically of parents, Moustakas explains that adults in caregiving roles must be aware, involved, and committed. Moustakas does not use the language described in this article; however, his themes are highly consistent with the themes that comprise calling: sacrifice, contribution, being mindful, and being passionate.

Satir (1972, 1976), perhaps more than any of the previously mentioned authors, emphasized the need for connection and understanding in child rearing for optimal outcomes in both parent and child. Also in her own language, Satir indicated that to be effective in “people making,” many of the attributes of calling must be present. Her emphasis on nurture for optimal growth and development in children and adults implicates issues of identity, passion, sacrifice, efforts to make a meaningful contribution, and more. Satir clearly describes the way in which child rearing is a noble, meaningful pursuit—even a calling.

In scholarly research, only the qualitative work of Oates et al. (2005) and Sellers et al. (2005) investigates the experience of calling in motherhood. These authors specifically investigated mothers who felt dually called to both work roles and child rearing. While making useful contributions to understanding calling in mothers who also feel called to their academic roles within a university institution, neither researcher deeply investigated calling in the parental context exclusively as either a construct or a process. Therefore, we sought to discover how parents describe calling, whether parents can experience calling in the child-rearing domain, and if so, what that experience is. Specifically, our first research question was to discover whether the

participants' descriptions of calling would be consistent with the themes and theory put forward by previous researchers. We were also seeking to understand how calling-oriented parenting would be described and what outcomes parents would experience in relation to such an approach to child rearing.

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 11 parents were interviewed for this study: five fathers and six mothers. All the parents identified as Australian, with the exception of one mother (of two children in primary school), who identified as Indonesian Australian. Two fathers and two mothers were parents of children who were approximately in their late teens and early 20s. Two fathers and four mothers were parents of children of primary school age (between 4 and 12 years), and one father was a parent of a child younger than 2 years. The mean age for the fathers was 39.4 years ( $SD = 9.94$ ). The mean number of children for the fathers in this sample was 2.60 ( $SD = 1.34$ ). The mothers' mean age was 37.5 years ( $SD = 6.47$ ). The mean number of children for the mothers in this sample was 3.17 ( $SD = .75$ ).

We used a purposive sampling method, seeking maximum variation in recruiting participants for the interviews (Patton, 1990). Specifically, we sampled for both fathers and mothers who were in very different child-rearing life stages to better understand the calling concept and experience across the most active years of the parental role for each gender.

### *Procedure*

All the participants provided informed consent before the interviews were conducted. Face-to-face, semistructured interviews were conducted with the participants by the principal author and recorded and transcribed verbatim. To avoid priming bias occurring within the interview setting, the emergent themes and constructs from previous research were not introduced by the interviewer. Rather, the respondents were required to develop and communicate their own ideas without prompting or preparation.

The participants were invited to provide basic demographic data and discuss their family situations generally. Three key questions guided the interview and analysis process: (1) What is a calling? (2) Does calling apply to child rearing? (3) How do parents experience calling in their lives?

Data were discarded for the mother of a child younger than 2 years due to the participant's inability to grasp the subject matter or discuss it in any

meaningful way. Further participants were not sought following the completion of the 11 interviews as data saturation was understood to have occurred after approximately 6 interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The interviews conducted after these 6 interviews were analyzed to gain confirmatory data across the various age and gender categories selected.

## **Analysis**

The first author conducted a comprehensive review of the transcription data to ensure accuracy before completing the analyses of the 11 interviews. The humanistic approach to psychology centers attention on experience as the primary phenomenon to be understood (Shaffer, 1978). As such, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999) was chosen due to the integral focus on participants' personal meaning, process, and experience, while acknowledging that such qualitative work necessitates an interpretative, and therefore subjective, process in data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smith et al., 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Willig, 2001). The purpose of this analysis was to understand the calling concept from the point of view of everyday parenting.

Each interview was listened to, read, and analyzed separately. The data were given unique codes for each new concept that was extracted. The codes were grouped according to themes, both explicit and implicit. The transcripts were revisited as themes were developed and refined. Questions such as "What does the participant really mean?" "What am I missing?" and "How is personal bias or theory interfering with my interpretation of this interview?" guided the analysis (Brymer & Oades, 2009). Once the themes emerged, they were assessed to delineate connections or subthemes. The process was repeated until unique themes were finalized that not only made sense from a definitional perspective (to the researchers) but were also consistent with the experiences provided by the participants. It is important to note also that although IPA centers on the lived experience of the participant, those who contributed to this study regularly invoked not only their own experiences but also their observations of others who they felt exemplified the points being made.

## **Results and Discussion**

Parents' descriptions of their conceptualization of calling and their observed and actual experiences with calling in child rearing were analyzed using IPA. Six themes emerged from the IPA. They are listed and briefly described in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Themes Identified as Elements of Calling

Theme (With Subthemes)	Description
Identity	Parents who feel called see the child-rearing role as central to their lives to the point where it defines them
Sacrifice	Parents who feel called are committed to the role to the extent that they relinquish opportunities to pursue a preferred activity to better fulfill the parental role
Meaningful contribution	
Positive development of self	Subjectively meaningful contribution to self-improvement and to the development of the child and a positive future society
Contribution to child	
Contribution to community	
Passion	Deep absorption in, and enjoyment of, the task of child rearing
Need/destiny	A sense that the individual is doing what he or she was “born to do”, is destined to do, or feels he or she <i>has</i> to do
Always on the mind/engulfs the consciousness	The child-rearing role and associated work are highly salient and are constantly present in the person’s awareness

## Identity

Consistent with previous work by the identity theorists (McBride & Rane, 1997; Thoits, 1992), the parental identity was consistently rated as the highest and most central role (alongside spousal roles) in the life of each participant. Also, consistent with identity theory (Burke & Tully, 1977; Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000), the participants indicated a positive association between the social interactions associated with their role as parents and their identification with the role. The identity theme, although strongly endorsed, was often latent when parents described the process and experience of calling in child rearing. When describing their observations and others’ experiences, the participants particularly expressed that a higher sense of calling would be associated with greater identification with the parental role.

Participant 8, a 35-year-old father of two children of primary school age, said, “I can’t see myself not being a parent. I feel that I was called to be a parent.” Another father, 37 years old and parent to a school-age daughter and

a toddler, emphasized the centrality of fatherhood in his identity by stating, "I couldn't imagine not being a dad now that I am" (Participant 11). A 27-year-old first-time father of an infant reflected, "Yeah, I guess it's something I've evolved into. You know, it's who I am now" (Participant 4).

Not all parents personally felt that the child-rearing role was always central to their lives. Participant 7, a 33-year-old mother of two school-age children, although admitting that the role of mother was one of her highest priorities, also stated, "I know it's part of me as a mother to look after the kids but it wasn't like a whole entire focus and, you know, I have other things to do." The fact that this mother acknowledged that motherhood was a part of, but not central to, her identity is highly relevant. This mother indicated that her role was one of the important things to *do* but she did not see it as more than that—that is, she did not perceive her maternal role as something that she *is*. This mother participates in child rearing but is not attempting to *be* a mother.

### *Sacrifice*

The participants consistently stated that parents who feel called are committed to the child-rearing role to the extent that they willingly relinquish opportunities to pursue a preferred activity to better fulfill the parental role. The participants strongly endorsed the theme of sacrifice as a component of calling in child rearing but also consistently emphasized that the sacrifice was worth the effort despite decrements in immediate pleasures and happiness.

The participants emphasized the ongoing effort of taking care of their children each day, with mothers in particular describing the routine of schooling, cooking, teaching, and generally "taking time to be there. If you're going to dedicate yourself to being called to be a mother and a parent, you have to be prepared to give a portion of your life in time" (Participant 1, mother of four boys in their late teens and early 20s). Participant 6, a 32-year-old mother of five children aged from 10 years to newly born, commented, "It's probably what my parents did, a lot of forsaking of yourself to raise these little ratbags into decent human beings. (Laughs) My parents gave up a lot for us. Very giving." A 45-year-old father (Participant 9) of four teenagers who either had gained or are gaining independence remarked that calling-oriented parents are "almost selfless I think." He indicated that the sacrifices parents will make for their children are significant, "because I think most people, you know, your kids, you'd give them an organ, you'd do whatever, you'd push them out of the way of a car . . . you'd do all those things."

The theme of sacrifice was perhaps best shown when Participant 3, a 34-year-old mother of two school-age children and a toddler, considered that parents who feel called to be parents may make large and dramatic sacrifices but these are not the sacrifices that demonstrate calling best. Indeed, the “small” sacrifices may, at times, be the most difficult sacrifices.

For me it's a very constant top of mind thought process of putting my children first, of putting aside the things that frustrate me and that I want to do often in order to meet the needs that they have. And it's often mundane little things during the day. I'm tired but I need to get up, and I need to get up with a smile on my face so that the kids can have a nice morning, so that they can go to school and have a good day. Days like that are good days for me because I know that despite the fact that I want to stay in bed and I'm probably cranky I am choosing consciously to put that aside and show them a happy face.

Baumeister (1991) links calling with Maslowian actualization and argues that the most important component of calling is the link it provides to an individual's value bases. In the child-rearing context, if a parent feels a high sense of calling toward the child-rearing role, she or he will endow that work with values-based labels, indicating that it is important, the right thing to do, and worthwhile. In association with this labeling, feeling a high sense of calling also implies that the parent will willingly undergo many risks and hardships and pay whatever costs are necessary in raising the child. To rear a child can be unappealing. Studies abundantly demonstrate that as a result of child rearing, subjective well-being is decreased, time is sacrificed, income is given up or reduced, as are sleep, careers, and various other aspirations and pursuits. Significant sacrifices are made, yet child rearing is perceived as being right, good, and necessary, and it is deeply tied to value bases, or “deeper satisfactions” (p. 126).

## Meaning

Of all the themes derived from the data, meaning in life is the most discussed in humanistic psychology (Frankl, 2006; Rogers, 1961, 1977). Three sub-themes were evident as the parents discussed how experiencing a calling creates a sense of meaning. First, the parents were mindful of the *personal meaning* associated with a sense of calling. Participant 11 felt that deep levels of meaning were available to parents:



Just the way your girls look at you. Look up and they, they love you. You walk in from work and they run up and hug you. Or in the morning when you're about to go to work and they go and stand at the door and say you're not allowed to go to work today. . . . How good is this? (Laughs) It doesn't get any better than that . . . I can only say for me, I just feel lucky to be a dad.

In many cases, the parents participating in the study indicated that child rearing aids in the attainment of the pinnacle of the Maslowian hierarchy of needs—self-actualization (Maslow, 1968). When asked whether it was possible to say no to a calling, Participant 6 said, “I think you can, but whether you'll reach fulfillment I don't know.” Participant 6 also noted that through the calling “you learn a lot about yourself.” Such a focus on meaning and fulfillment appears heavily humanistic in its bent. The parents indicated that for those who feel called, child rearing is likely to direct them internally toward obtaining fulfillment, meaning, and eudaimonic satisfaction. Participants 3 and 9 indicated that the sense of meaning and the personal growth associated with a sense of calling promote a deep feeling of gratitude: “It's a privilege. . . . They'd see it as a . . . gift that we're given” (Participant 9). Participant 3 suggested that a calling-oriented mother

would find nobility in it and an appreciation of the gravity and importance of the role . . . Such a parent would feel “privileged.” [Begins to cry] I think she would feel like it's the most important thing she could do and it was very well worth the sacrifices that might be involved to fulfill that calling well.

This statement indicates that the called parent sees the role as so personally meaningful that he or she would go well beyond the everyday demands that many associate with child rearing. Consistently, the parents indicated that those parents who were called would gain joy, happiness, or satisfaction from the meaning associated with the role.

Second, child rearing becomes meaningful because of the potential for creating positive and lasting change in the lives of one's children. Much has been written about creating a legacy with one's children and the associated meaning this can create (Baumeister, 1991; Brotherson & White, 2007). Participant 5, a 35-year-old mother of two school-age children, was positive about the prospect that “I can make a difference in their life.” Participant 8 recognized that

when I'm spending time with my family and I can see that I've made a difference in my children's life or I saw that something I did taught them something . . . I think to myself, you know this is really important.

Thus, personal meaning was obtained through contributing to his children's development. He indicated that "if you have a calling you feel that you can actually contribute something to the world or something to a person." And Participant 11 (a father of two young girls) strongly endorsed the principle that meaningfulness in child rearing was centrally based on creating a positive life for his children: "I have this opportunity to, I feel like I can give them a lot. And not materially, but I can give them a lot more than, I don't know, emotionally, just life skills."

Third, parents who feel called, according to some participants in this study, felt an obligation to raise children well because of the potential impact those children may have on society more generally. Participant 6 emphasized the personal meaning developed from the belief that raising children well benefits society: "What's the outcome of my energy? What am I creating? What's the posterity I'm leaving on the earth? Rather than 'I'm just here for a good time.'"

### *Passion*

Parents who feel called to be parents, and who desire to be the best possible parents for their children, are passionate about their role and its associated tasks in a similar way to those called to other vocations (Baumeister, 1991; Peterson, Park, Hall, & Seligman, 2009; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Participant 1 stated, "Passion. They're passionate, they're dedicated, they're enthusiastic. They're determined, they're focused . . . they're just totally engrossed in what they're doing." Participant 4 used the term *engagement* to describe calling in child rearing. And in contrasting those who feel called as parents with those who don't, Participant 5 observed

obviously the one that doesn't think that it's very important, they won't really concentrate on the, anything I suppose. If they don't think it's important why would they do their best? There are obviously other things that are important to them and they'll be more concentrating on that other thing.

Participant 9 (father of four emerging adults) spoke of parents he felt were called as possessing

passion, commitment, it's what they were meant to do. And I see that as very similar whether it is that line of saving the world or the environment or looking after these people. The motivations and what they portray as far as their passion and what they want to do.

### *Need To Do It/Destiny (Urgency)*

The parents regularly invoked the concept of a "need" to be a parent as associated with calling and a sense of destiny. "They have a sense of 'this is the right thing for me'" (Participant 1). "I think you show it, you sort of go towards, you flow towards whatever your calling is" (Participant 2, 53-year-old male and father of four teenagers). Calling reflects being "drawn towards something" (Participant 10, a 48-year-old mother of three teens). Participant 9 spoke of the birth of his daughter:

It's a very emotional time and I don't know with every father but when she was born my thought was "That's why I'm here." . . . I did cry at the time . . . I thought "this is what life's about."

He wept openly while discussing this experience as he reflected on his sense of destiny and the need to be the best father he could to his children. The participants reflected a "feeling" or "sense" that those called to any domain, including child rearing, felt that they "needed" to fulfill that call as part of their life's mission. This construct appears to be the essence of the phrase "doing what I was born to do," which is often associated with the calling concept.

### *Always on My Mind (Engulfs the Consciousness)*

The final theme that was strongly represented as the parents spoke about the way calling and child rearing hang together was the all-consuming nature of the role for those who feel called. Although acknowledging that much of the top-of-mind aspects of child rearing revolve around general busy-ness and looking after the children, "if you're passionate about something I think that, what you feel your calling is, it's always on your mind" (Participant 8). The idea that parents are "always there" was also reflected in most participants' ideas about parents who feel called. "They just spend a lot of time thinking about the issues at hand" (Participant 1). Participant 1 described her husband's relationship with his mature stepson, who lived 1,000 kilometers

**Table 3.** Comparison of Themes From Current Research With Previously Established Constructs Comprising Calling

	Baumeister (1991)	Wrzesniewski et al. (1997)	Dik and Duffy (2009)	Dobrow (2006)	Current Findings
External call	✓		✓		
Meaning/purpose	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Contribution (to self, other, or society)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Passion	✓	✓		✓	✓
Identity	✓	✓		✓	✓
Urgency	✓			✓	✓
Longevity			✓ <sup>a</sup>	✓	✓
Engulfs consciousness		✓		✓	✓
Domain-specific self-esteem		✓		✓	✓
Sacrifice	✓				✓

<sup>a</sup>Latent theme, not explicitly stated in the definition of calling.

away from the family. She indicated that “he is to the point of obsession with his son . . . he’s always thinking about him in the back of his mind.” And Participant 3 was aware that although much time is devoted to the general care of her children, “if I’m not physically caring or being with them then quite often I am doing things that lead to that end. They are a constant topic of conversation.”

An ongoing preoccupation in parents’ consciousness of the child as a person and of associated child-rearing responsibility is perhaps unsurprising. However, the way in which the participants indicated the positive association between the continual mental presence of the child and the person’s sense of calling was quite strong.

When taken together with previous research and theory on the presence of a sense of calling in parents, this research remains highly consistent. Table 3 contains a comparison of the themes evident in this research with previous definitions and descriptions of calling (Baumeister, 1991; Bellah et al., 1985; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dobrow, 2006; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

At no time did the participants suggest that a person might consistently meet the high standards of thought and behavior that might be considered representative of a parent high on the calling continuum. On the contrary, the participants indicated their own experiences of failing calling, at least

behaviorally, generally in concert with failure in the affective and cognitive domains. In every case, the failure to maintain this sense of calling was perceived as a negative period for both parent and child. Furthermore, these participants indicated their desire to realign thought, emotion, and behavior as quickly as possible to be in keeping with the humanistic ideal of self-realization, creating a reality that reflected their values (Bühler & Allen, 1972).

### *Additional Themes*

The participants in this study also acknowledged two other aspects of calling that were particularly emphasized in Dobrow's (2006) work. Specifically, a calling entails longevity rather than being a moment-to-moment, fleeting urge to engage in a given activity. Participants referred to "the long run," the role demanding "a lifetime," the "long slog" of child rearing, and the fact that the role is "always there." Similarly, although not receiving heavy emphasis, the presence of the self-esteem construct associated with calling remained consistent with previous research (Dobrow, 2006; Seligman, 2002; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). The participants reflected on the "self-satisfied" feelings that come with fulfilling a calling to raise children. They spoke of how they felt "happy . . . content . . . relaxed . . ." and enjoyed being with their children. Participant 7, after having success as a parent, stated, "It gave me self-esteem, believe it or not. I'm not a bad parent after all . . . when you finally figure it out." Neither longevity nor domain-specific self-esteem was among the themes that appeared strongly in the analysis. Yet their presence, however small, indicates that the multidimensional construct of calling may be now at a point where clear definitions can be established and used as a foundation on which to build future research.

Humanists emphasize that as we experience our existence, we are active rather than passive, and positive rather than negative (Bühler & Allen, 1972). Perhaps this, more than anything, describes the differences in experience between parents who demonstrate the attributes of a calling in their child rearing and those who do not. Parents with a high sense of calling choose to act and interact with their environment. They choose involvement and being. Conversely, parents who do not experience the sense of calling to parenthood in any great degree may be significantly disconnected from the parental role and associated relationships. They are, instead, acted on in their social role as parents, but if their values direct them to find meaning, identity, contribution, passion, awareness, and a life path elsewhere, their goals will direct them toward that alternate path to meaning.

### *Limitations and Cultural and Religious Challenges*

Of the 11 participants in this study, 8 indicated that they were comfortable with the calling concept, its historical roots, and the sense of destiny it suggests. Two of the 3 participants who were not comfortable with the term *calling* were male, and 1 was female. All 3 participants who were uncomfortable with the term cited religious antipathy as a concern. One of these male participants also indicated strong opposition to the idea of calling due to perceived violation of free will (Rogers, 1961). Each of these responses will be considered, by participant, below.

Participant 4, a 27-year-old father of an infant, suggested that he was only vaguely familiar with the term *calling*, given that “I’m not very religious or anything like that.” He commented that “I assume it’s like when you mean you’re destined to do something or you, you know, you feel like you’re born into the world to do something. That’d be my understanding of it anyway.” The religious underpinning of calling was not consistent with his life philosophy, and this made the term somewhat unattractive to him. This participant was capable of discussing how a calling might work, including the passion and “engagement” a person who is called would exhibit. He was also willing to concede that callings did not demand religiosity or spirituality. However, he maintained a negative demeanor when discussing the calling concept. As the discussion continued, he explained, “I think I’m quite responsible for my own destiny. There’s outside influences but at the end of the day I make my own decisions on where I want to go.” For Participant 4, to be called meant a loss of self-determination. He felt that to follow a calling meant that a person must surrender free will, thus suffering a contravention of autonomy. When questioned about the extent to which this might be true, he reluctantly acknowledged that a person who feels called to a particular life role, “well, they do make their own decisions.” He maintained, though, that to claim to be following a calling was still infringing on his ability to be his own man. Of course, such a suggestion of free will is in contrast to the Rogerian idea that all action is determined by preceding factors, environmental constraints, and so on (Rogers, 1961). This participant and Participant 11 did not regard environmental or other factors as impediments to their ability to determine their own lives. They are, in their minds, masters of their destiny. To be sure, it is unlikely that a discussion of existential situations would have been particularly meaningful to these participants. Suffice to say, they believed that control and free will were theirs to choose.

Participant 10, a mother of three children in their late teens, was cautious in speaking of calling. While being interviewed, this participant was quite

willing to go along with the general concept of calling. After the recorded interview, however, she disclosed a feeling of discomfort with the term *calling* because of its religious derivation. During the interview, this participant initially avoided linking calling and religion, instead defining the origins of calling as being when an individual is

drawn towards doing something. But I think some people think that comes from nowhere but I think that comes from various experiences you've had as you've grown up and it puts a familiarity into some areas of your life and you can feel a need to be in that area. I think a lot of people think it comes from, it's just something that's automatically somehow got there, but I don't think that's right. I think if they look back into their past and you look at what they're doing and where they've been they actually feel like they should head that way because of the experiences they've had when they've been younger.

Participant 10 conceded that "you think immediately of people who go into religion, that have a calling to God." She then indicated that she perceived those who pursue such a religiously oriented "calling to God" were "sort of more selfish in some ways." No justification for this view was articulated despite probing. Nonetheless, the religious notions attached to calling appeared to create within this participant a feeling that calling was a prickly concept. In spite of this, Participant 10 clearly articulated what calling means, giving excellent examples of paragons of calling, and when asked whether someone could feel called to be a mother or a father, she responded, "Oh definitely." Her sense was that although *calling* is not a term she felt comfortable with, the subjective nature of a calling is such that she felt comfortable with others who indicate a sense of calling in their own lives.

Participant 11, a 37-year-old father of two children (one in school and one in preschool) stated,

Yeah, that term to me like, it's almost like a religious thing to me, which I don't have a bar of. Life is life, and I feel very lucky just the way it's panned out for me just with work and family and what not.

He added that "I hear it all the time but it's just not something I buy into." Participant 11 was instantly defensive when the topic of religion was raised and immediately linked the term to religion and spirituality. He spoke of his role as a father and of his subjective sense of fortune, as opposed to calling, in the progress of his life:

And so for me it's not a calling. I was presented with choices along the way and I made choices. And I would have loved to have changed some things or other things, but if I hadn't have done all the things I've done I wouldn't be at this point now happily married with two kids enjoying my job, all that sort of thing. So, yeah for me it's not a calling. It's just, these are the cards I was dealt and I played them.

As stated above, free will is deemed important to this participant. Reading between the lines of Participant 11's comments, there may be some questioning of free will being exercised. Although not explicitly articulating an issue with free will, he seems unwilling to accept the idea of calling because he "made choices," thus promoting the idea that he is his own man and is not led by a religious sense. Yet he refers to fortune and luck in the way life has "panned out" the way it has, dealing him "cards," which required acceptance but also choice.

Participants 4 and 11 reflect concerns with both religion and self-determination related to calling. Participant 8, a 35-year-old father of two children in school, also raised the issue in his response to calling but from a different perspective. He suggested that to be called was "maybe something we're destined to do." When queried about the concept of destiny and how it might affect choice, his response was that

I believe we have choices in everything. But I also believe that sometimes we're given opportunities, and you know, there's been a few times when a good opportunity has been right there and we can choose to take it, or not to. Or run with it.

Participant 8's remark indicated that free will is not diminished through following one's calling. Rather, the willingness to follow this subjective sense of calling would be useful to "reach your potential," perhaps actually enhancing a sense of free will because of the conscious choice to follow one's daimon. Similar sentiments surrounding achieving fulfillment and actualization were made by Participants 3, 6, and 9. Each of these participants suggested that a calling might be necessary to lead a fulfilling and meaningful life. In other words, although Participant 4 indicated that to follow a calling might attenuate free will, several participants felt that responding to one's calling might lead to greater opportunities to choose, thus enhancing authentic living and happiness (Seligman, 2002).

Of note, participants who contribute data to child-rearing investigations are often likely to respond in a socially desirable manner (Morsbach & Prinz, 2006).



This may particularly be the case when describing qualitative personal experiences to an interviewer enquiring about optimal moments. Moreover, social pressure to perceive child rearing as positive certainly exists. Although not reported, the participants in this study were also asked to describe their experiences when not living up to their “ideals” as described by their definitions of calling. The respondents were frank and open with the interviewer, suggesting that although social pressure may exist, they were willing to disclose both good and bad personal information during their interviews. The candor with which the participants expressed their dislike for certain aspects of “calling” further suggests that socially desirable responding may not have occurred in this research.

### ***Future Research***

The ability to measure the concept of calling may be beneficial for those working with parents and caregivers. Social desirability and ceiling effects would need to be considered in the development of a self-report measure of calling in parenthood (Morsbach & Prinz, 2006). The measurement of level of calling for parents should present quantitative data demonstrating whether calling in child rearing is correlated with similar optimal outcomes that have been shown for participants who indicated a sense of calling in previous vocational research (Baumeister, 1991; Bellah et al., 1985; Dik & Steger, 2008; Seligman, 2002; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). It may also be useful to consider the mediating role that attachment styles and child temperament may or may not play in the extent to which a parent identifies with calling elements. The number of children in a family may also influence the sense of calling, as well as whether children have normal or disabled functioning.

Through the measurement of calling on a continuum from optimal to non-optimal extremities, parents whose goals of being a parent were viewed from a less optimal perspective might be encouraged, through intervention, to strive for the more optimal level of development in this role. This particular suggestion presents an interesting empirical and even existential question. In its truest form, calling is a subjective experience, spontaneously and organically developed as a disposition or “orientation.” We believe that it is an important empirical question to investigate whether such an orientation can be deconstructed into teachable elements. Interventions (counseling, workshops, etc.) and psycho-educational tools (books, Internet sites, flyers, etc.) may be useful means through which parents can be reminded of the objective importance of their role (to reinforce identity). Such tools and interventions

might provide paragons of calling, highlighting the constituents of the construct and reinforcing their usefulness in leading to optimal outcomes. As with some participants in this study, a parent may or may not ever explicitly state that he or she feels called to be a parent. What may be more important, however, is whether the individual feels like a parent, is willing to sacrifice, derives meaning through the contribution the role demands, is passionate about being effective, believes it is the right path to follow, and is mindful of his or her children. Perhaps interventions such as these might serve as a reminder to parents of deeply held but rarely tapped values and meaning regardless of their subjective experience with (or without) calling. William Shakespeare stated, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (*Romeo and Juliet*). Indeed, the findings from this study suggest that regardless of whether parents experience calling as such, they can still profit within the family context through the development of an authentic adoption of calling-related constructs.

As an extension of the possibility of teaching the components of calling to develop the best in parents and their families, it is important to understand whether calling may present a "dark side." If a parent is too calling oriented, will he or she be overprotective, oblivious to other important aspects of life, and even unbalanced or psychologically lacking in stability? If an excessive calling orientation were found, would it promote optimization or dysfunction through enmeshment?

## Summary

The participants interviewed were unequivocally positive in their statements regarding being a parent. Each parent saw the child-rearing role as a part of his or her identity, as requiring sacrifice, and as contributing meaning. Each of these themes may be considered relevant for parents who are called or not called. The themes of passion, being destined to parenthood or needing to be a good parent, and the overtaking of consciousness appeared to be consistent with participants' perceptions of what a calling-oriented parent would be like. The participants responded to questions regarding both the definition and the experience of calling in a manner highly consistent with previous research. In particular, there exists a perception that a calling orientation to child rearing is associated with optimal experience in the child-rearing domain. Given that Dik and Duffy (2009) based their definition on a review of career and vocational literature, and Dobrow (2006) based her definition of calling on interviews with young musicians, this previously unresearched population (parents) identified each of the core constructs (or themes) from

previous research in their interviews. Although not all themes were as dominant as in previous research, each was present to some degree.

In addition, the participants indicated the theme of sacrifice as one of the most salient themes for parents who are called. This had not been highlighted by Dik and Duffy (2009) or Dobrow (2006), although Baumeister (1991) described sacrifice as an important component of calling in some circumstances. Such a potentially difficult theme suggests that calling is not a “Pollyanna”-ish concept developed to enshrine positive emotions such as joviality, cheer, delight, and joy as supreme. Although the parents in this study described positive experiences with children associated with a high sense of calling, there was little to suggest that happiness was all that they sought in family life. The desire to experience meaning through contribution and the desire to sacrifice indicate a readiness to endure setbacks, failures, disappointments, and challenges. The parents in this study did acknowledge that although it is unusual for someone to clap with joy when challenges occur, they are arguably the most enriching and meaningful parts of our lives. Family life offers adversity and the attendant opportunity for growth and development. The assumption that families should be happy is a vivid contrast to history’s lessons and wisdom. Indeed, although there is a significantly expanding literature on the many and varied ways in which we might promote happiness, the focus on meaning through calling may provide a much more stable architecture in family life. The family is a place of great struggle, challenge, and turmoil. It is a place of growth, experience, development, and difficulty. And perhaps that is why the family is a place of so much *meaning*. Clearly, child rearing is one such role that those who feel called are required to make significant sacrifices for and a role to which some may experience a sense of being called to.

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## Bios



**Justin Coulson** obtained his BPsychSc with first-class honors from the University of Queensland, before commencing his Ph D candidature at the University of Wollongong. His interest is in optimal family functioning. He and his wife, Kylie, are the parents of five daughters. He claims that his Ph D is his personally tailored self-improvement program.



**Lindsay Oades** is Director of the Australian Institute of Business Wellbeing, Sydney Business School, University of Wollongong. He is interested in applications of positive psychology and well-being in health and business contexts—particularly those that seek to humanize organizations.



**Gerard Stoyles** is a clinical psychologist, registered to practice. He lectures in child and adolescent clinical psychology. Gerard's research interests are in the field of well-being and health for families and individuals, including children and adolescents. He also researches in the area of spiritual development, especially as this relates to children's overall development and the well-being of individuals.